



AJ's Café and Ice Cream
by Rich Belmont

I have driven by AJ's Café on University Avenue in Dubuque hundreds of times. I must admit, though, it was only recently I finally stopped in to have a sandwich. You see, I had this idea I would be eating in the middle of a drug store surrounded by notions and sundries.



furnished with a counter, several tables and even an outdoor patio. And the sandwich I ordered? It was excellent! So much so I have been back for several breakfast, lunch and even supper items in an effort to make up for lost time!

The Café is named for Chief Executive Officer Dick Hartig's grandfather, AJ Hartig, who opened the first Hartig Drug in Dubuque in 1904. There are many photos adorning the walls with scenes of what drug stores were like over a century ago. And by the way, in case you young people are wondering: notions are small, inexpensive useful things and sundries are miscellaneous small items sometimes called odds and ends.



AJ's Café is open every day serving fresh baked pastries, fresh salads and just roasted high quality meats in delicious sandwiches. A fully equipped modern kitchen and bakery complete with convection ovens is located downstairs in the basement.



If you have never been to this Café or have not visited in a while you need to taste some of their new items. In February, 2014 experienced and talented co-managers were brought in to introduce some new ideas. Jennifer Johannsen started working in food and beverage when she was only 15 at Dubuque Hy-Vee Food

Stores and has over 15 years experience. Erin Potter spent 16 years at Breitbach's Country Dining in Balltown, Iowa and 5 years in the kitchen of Mercy Medical Center-Dyersville. She is knowledgeable in all aspects of the restaurant business.

To begin with AJ's is a neat little internet café. It has free Wi-Fi and serves Jumpy Monkey coffee. This premium coffee is made from individually selected beans from around the world that are hand-roasted in small batches in Sioux City, Iowa. The neat thing about Jumpy Monkey is it is owned by Opportunities Unlimited. Jumpy Monkey products provide meaningful and purposeful employment for adults who have sustained traumatic brain or spinal cord injuries (www.JumpyMonkey.com).



In the morning sip your coffee with a bagel or croissant, scone, brownie, banana bar or one of AJ's mammoth muffins (left top). The Cinnful Roll (left bottom) is infused with cinnamon and is topped with scrumptious cream cheese icing. The Breakfast Sandwich is oh so satisfying: Scrambled eggs, cheese, bacon or sausage is stuffed into your choice of bagel or croissant. My favorite morning starter is the



Flatbread Breakfast Pizza with tasty sausage, ham or bacon and scrambled eggs. And just so you know the bakery items can be purchased in all 4 Dubuque Hartig Drug Stores.



The Chili is first rate. It's available every day along with at least one other soup and usually two. I could eat the thick Chicken Noodle soup any day of the week and I will be back for the Vegetable Beef, Potato and Bacon and Broccoli Cheese soups as well.



The salads are refreshing and are ideal for light summer lunches. The Garden Salad is shredded iceberg lettuce topped with shredded American cheese, tomatoes and onions. The Chef Salad contains a generous portion of house roasted and hand carved turkey, ham, onions, tomatoes and hard-boiled egg. It is covered with a 3 cheese blend of cheddar, American and Monterey Jack. You choose one of 7 regular dressings or one of three yogurt based dressings: Ranch, Feta Cheese or Parmesan Caesar.

Did I not say I have become an AJ's Frequent Diner in a very short time? Well, the excellent Daily Specials are partly responsible for that. There is one for every week-day and I have had them all:



- Monday – Open Faced Roast Beef
- Tuesday – Turkey and Dressing Sandwich
- Wednesday – Sloppy Joe
- Thursday – Tacos
- Friday – Open Faced Turkey



The open faced sandwiches are in-house roasted and hand carved meats on top of thick slices of white bread and topped with mashed potatoes and gravy. Turkey and Dressing and Sloppy Joes are made in the kitchen from secret recipes. The Tacos are served in either 3 hard corn shells or in taco salad. They are overflowing with meat and tomatoes and are accompanied by salsa, black olives and jalapeño peppers on the side.

When you order one of the fantastic sandwiches you specify if you want it served hot or cold. The Angus Roast Beef, Ham or Turkey sandwiches are all made with your choice of Swiss, Provolone, Cheddar, American or Pepper Jack cheese. The signature Santa Fe Turkey has red onion, cheddar cheese, bacon and a tantalizing Santa Fe sauce. The Mushroom and Swiss and Angus Roast Beef sandwiches are bursting with flavor.

While I like all of these specialty sandwiches I actually find it's more fun to ask the friendly staff to make me a custom made version. First I choose roast beef, turkey, chicken, ham, bacon or perhaps turkey, tuna or egg salad. Then I ask for one of the five cheeses on one of the seven kinds of bread. After that I choose from a list of nine vegetables including lettuce, tomatoes, red onions, mushrooms, sauerkraut, roasted red peppers, black olives,



green peppers and jalapeños. And finally I pick from fourteen condiments including Yellow, Honey, Dijon or Stone Ground Mustard; Ranch, Honey, Santa Fe Ranch, Bistro, Horseradish or Red Pesto Sauce; Oil, Vinegar; Mayonnaise and Garlic Parmesan Mayo.

There are also several specialty Flatbread Pizzas like the Buffalo Chicken Ranch with grilled chicken, buffalo sauce (similar to a Louisiana Hot Sauce) mozzarella cheese and ranch sauce. Here again you can have fun building your own by adding any two of your favorite toppings.



AJ's Café is a casual diner with an eager to please staff and it's a great place to bring kids for anytime meals and snacks. They have hot dogs, mac & cheese and half grill cheese sandwiches served with juice box and a cookie. Snacks include brownies, Scotcheroos, banana, pumpkin and Rice Krispies bars, soft pretzels and smoothies just to name a few.



And of course everybody is a kid when it comes to eating ice cream! There are at least 9 or 10 luscious flavors of Sisler's Ice Cream to choose from. In 1908 George Sisler started Sisler's Dairy Products in Ohio, Illinois (www.Sislers.com). Today the company is still family owned and operated by the 3rd generation of the Sisler Family. Their products are creamy without being overly sweet and thankfully they are reasonably priced. I usually go for the Butter Pecan, French Silk or Moose Tracks. However, I do know several people who say Strawberry Cheesecake is the very best!



In conclusion I must say AJ's Café and Ice Cream is a great place to eat. And if you need to buy some notions and sundries just go through the door into Hartig Drug!

Do you have a favorite restaurant you would like to see reviewed? Please send your requests, suggestions and comments to Argosy at argomark@mchsi.com.

AJ's Café
1600 University Ave, Dubuque, IA 52001
Tel: 563-690-0678 • Fax: 563-690-0677
www.HartigDrug.com Facebook.com/AJsCafeDBQ
HOURS: Mon – Fri: 7 am – 9 pm
Sat: 8 am – 9 pm, Sun: 9 am – 6 pm
DINING STYLE: Come as you are
NOISE LEVEL: Conversational
RECOMMENDATIONS: Cinnamon Roll; Muffins; Flatbread Pizzas; Breakfast Sandwich; Chili; Angus Beef, Ham, Turkey, Santa Fe Turkey and Mushroom and Swiss Sandwiches; Open Faced Roast Beef or Turkey Daily Specials; Tacos; Sloppy Jo, Sisler's Ice Cream
LIQUOR SERVICE: None
PRICES: \$1.99 - \$7.99
PAY OPTIONS: Cash, Checks, Debit and All Credit Cards
ACCESSIBILITY: Front Door & Restrooms near Pharmacy or downstairs via Elevator
KIDS POLICY: Menu items, High Chair, Booster
RESERVATIONS: No **CATERING:** Yes **TAKE OUT:** Yes
DELIVERY: Yes, Mon – Fri, 10 am – 2 pm, \$25 minimum
PARKING: Large Private Lot